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When kids need a parental push

by Michael Grose

Watching your child or young person manage their nervous moments can be challenging for parents, but it comes with the territory. How you react to an anxiety-inducing moment can influence the way kids approach uncomfortable situations in the future.

Sadly, avoidance is a well-entrenched pattern of behaviour that holds many kids back from experiencing life as they would like. The comfort zone that many crave to stay in can be like maximum security prison where there's no escape. It's incumbent upon parents to make sure participation rather than avoidance becomes the most likely response even when kids feel nervous and tense.

Holding firm in the face of resistance

Recently, Melanie, a mother of four, told me how she approached her teenage daughter's nervousness about taking a part-time job. Fifteen-year-old Chloe, a quiet, thoughtful, studious girl wanted a job but was too nervous to go for an interview. Melanie took a firm stance with her daughter and insisted that she go for the job interview, despite some incredibly strong resistance.

Melanie said, "I drove Chloe to the interview. She was so nervous that she was shaking. As we got closer Chloe begged me not to make her do it. I felt so sorry for her, but I wouldn't let her off the hook. I knew that if she wouldn't do this then she'd always avoid the things that make her nervous. I told her that there was no option. This is something she had to do."

Chloe was successful with the job interview. The first thing she did when she got home was to thank Melanie for holding her ground and insisting that she go for the interview.

Making decisions in a child's best interests

There's a natural tendency for kids to avoid doing activities where they may fail, struggle or even risk being laughed at. At such times, parents who can see the bigger picture need to make decisions for their child to prevent the development of negative patterns of behaviour that are so difficult to break. It takes significant parental sensitivity and courage to avoid taking anxiety-inducing activities temporarily away from a child or teenager. But it's the right thing to do if developing a child's confidence, rather than their feelings of helplessness is your goal.

Melanie's daughter still feels nervous before she goes to work, but the nerves are getting less each time. Importantly, her courage account is being filled along with her bank account each time she heads off to work.

You should never underestimate value of a little parenting push, particularly if anxiety tends to be your child's constant companion.